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A cognitive study of happiness metaphors in Persian and English

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Abstract

Metaphorical expressions are widely used in everyday language. The present study aims to examine and compare how metaphorical expressions of happiness are employed in English and Persian. The conceptual metaphor theory was adopted as the analytical framework. Using the framework, emotive metaphorical expressions of happiness were analysed according to these metaphorical mappings. The findings showed that English and Persian share many metaphorical expressions of happiness that are based on common bodily experiences. Consequently, the similarities can be attributed to the universality of conceptual metaphors, whereas differences in metaphorical expressions relate to specific different cultural modes in English and Persian.

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1. Introduction

A wide range of views exists on the significance and function of metaphorical language, and they differ considerably. Aristotle refers to metaphorical language as merely ‘decorative and ornamental’ that does not add any additional information to the discourse (Gibbs, 1994:74). Some other linguists, however, argue that metaphors are not just particular strings of words but rather are realizations of conceptual metaphors on the basis of human experiences and feelings (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Johnson, 1987). Lakoff & Johnson (1980) believe that metaphor is of the mind, the brain and the body. Hence, many who are familiar with Lakoff’s view of metaphor claim that most conceptual metaphors are universal. They believe that several unrelated languages may share conceptual metaphors for particular emotional concepts. Happiness is one of these

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emotional concepts. For instance, according to Kovecses (1991), there are many conceptual metaphors for happiness in English but three of them have been recognized as major metaphors: HAPPINESS IS UP ‘I’m feeling up’, ‘I’m walking on air’, HAPPINESS IS LIGHT ‘She brightened up’, HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER ‘He’s bursting with joy’. Ning Yu (1995) found similar conceptual metaphors of happiness in Chinese. He showed that all the metaphors of happiness and anger in English as analysed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) can also be found in the Chinese conceptual metaphor system.

Other cross-cultural studies have shown that different languages exhibit different patterns of figurative language use. In some cases of variation, metaphors that are frequent in one language are rare or nonexistent in another, as is the case of some metaphors in English and Spanish (Barcelona & Soriano, 2004). In other cases, it was shown that English and Arabic share some basic-level metaphors in conceptualising happiness and anger (Fawwaz Al-Abed Al-Haq & Ahmad El-Sharif, 2008).

According to Kovecses (2005), metaphors tend to be universal and near-universal at generic-level, and they tend to be different cross-linguistically at specific-level. For instance, HAPPINESS IS UP is a generic-level metaphor, and a specific-level version of this metaphor in English is HAPPINESS IS BEING OFF THE GROUND which, as suggested by Ning Yu (1995), does not exist in Chinese. Ning Yu (1995) also points out that Chinese shares with English all the basic metaphorical source domains for happiness such as vertical orientation (up), light, fluid in a container, but the alternative metaphor, HAPPINESS IS FLOWER IN THE HEART, found in Chinese, is not present in English.

The results of cross-cultural studies show that different languages can share some conceptual metaphors for particular emotional concepts and, as such, are universal conceptual metaphors created by universal human experiences especially in relation to human emotions. This study will examine the universality and/or disparities in metaphorical concepts of emotion in English and Persian.

2. Data Collection and Methodology

The present study adopts the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as a framework to compare and contrast emotive metaphorical expressions in English and Persian. A number of metaphorical expressions used in describing happiness in both languages were collected. The English emotive metaphorical expressions were gathered mainly from the works of Lakoff and Kövecses (Lakoff, 1980; Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Kövecses, 1991), and the Persian metaphorical expressions were chosen from the Persian literary text *Suvashun* (Daneshvar, 1969), and *Farhange-e Kenayat-e Sokhan* (Anvary, 2004).

2.1 Procedure

In order to validate the data, metaphorical expressions of happiness in English and Persian were examined through two phases, namely grouping or juxtaposing the conceptual patterns in the languages and comparative analysis. First, the metaphorical expressions of happiness were gathered and grouped into several conceptual metaphors. In the second phase, each Persian metaphorical expression with English phonetic transcription and literal meaning was exemplified for each conceptual metaphor. If a Persian emotive metaphorical expression could be found in English with the same literal meaning and conceptual metaphor, both metaphors were considered as completely equivalent; and if a metaphorical expression was an instantiation of a different conceptual metaphor, absent in the other language, they were considered as dissimilar.

3. Findings and Discussion

To analyze the data, emotive metaphorical expressions relating to happiness were investigated and the data collected from the study were qualitatively analysed. It is noteworthy that many comparative studies are based mainly upon Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) and Kovecses' (1991) theories, from whose work the English samples are taken. Our data reveal several metaphorical conceptualisations of happiness in Persian and English.

3.1 Orientational metaphors

According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), the first main group of conceptual metaphors represents happiness as an upward orientation in which happiness is associated with an elevated place off the ground. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 15) made an attempt to explain the experiential basis for this metaphor - 'drooping posture goes along with sadness and depression, erect posture with a positive emotional state'. Thus, the conceptual metaphors HAPPY IS UP, BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND and HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN are formed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Our data show that many emotive metaphorical expressions used in describing happiness come under upward orientation metaphor. Under this metaphorical concept, some of the emotive metaphorical expressions in English are:

- 1)
 - a) We had to **cheer him up**
 - b) They were in **high spirits**
 - c) She was on **cloud nine**
 - d) I am **feeling up**
 - e) That **boosted my spirits**
 - f) My **spirits rose**
 - g) I was in **seventh heaven**

Persian shares precisely the same metaphorical concept and has a number of metaphorical expressions that express happiness in terms of upward orientation:

- 2)
 - a) roy-e / **abr** / ha / dare / **rah** / **mire**
 on / **cloud/s** / have / **walk** / **ing**
Lit: walking on the clouds
 - b) rohi-am / kheili / **bal-ast**
 spirit -my/ very / **up** - is
Lit: My spirit is very up
 - c) az / khoshhali / shish / meter / **paridam/bala**
 from / happiness / six / meter / **jump** / **up**
Lit: I jump up six meters for happiness
 - d) seda-ye / ghaghahe / anha / be / falak / mi-resid
 sound / laughter / they / to / sky / rose
Lit: Their laughter rose to the sky

In the above examples, the bold phrases such as “*roye abra rah raftan*” (walking on the clouds), “*shish metr paridam bala*” (jump up six meters) and “*sedaye khande be falak residan*” (laughter rose to sky) are all related to the upward orientation and are used to express happiness in Persian. It is obvious that English and Persian contain many metaphorical expressions of happiness using this conceptual metaphor. Consequently, there is the metaphorical concept HAPPY IS UP in both English and Persian.

3.2 Light metaphor

According to Kövecses (1991), another major metaphorical concept of happiness in English is HAPPINESS IS LIGHT. This kind of conceptualization can be seen in the following English expressions:

- 3)
- a) *She was glowing with happiness*
 - b) *When she heard the news, she **lit up***
 - c) *He **radiates joy***
 - d) *Her face was **bright with happiness***
 - e) *She has a **sunny smile***

These expressions contain a variety of concepts in using light as a representing happiness. HAPPINESS IS LIGHT is also applicable in Persian, as illustrated by the examples below:

- 4)
- a) *tamame / soratash/ ba / labkhandi/ **roshan** / shode-bod*
*Whole / face / with/ smile / **light up** / became- was*
Lit: His face brightened with a smile.
 - b) *Chashmash/ **bargh** / mizad*
*Eyes / **electricity**/ hit*
Lit: His eyes electricity hit.
 - c) *as / khoshhali / sorat-esh / midarakhshid*
*from/ happy / **face** / **sparkled***
Lit: His face sparkled with joy.
 - d) *del-am / **roshan** / shod*
*heart-my/ **light up**/ became*
Lit: My heart became lit up.

It is worthwhile mentioning here that the above examples (4a - 4c) show that a happy person does not suffer from any harmful and unpleasant internal changes because the muscles in his face become relaxed and the eyes become enlarged. That is why such a person seems clearer and brighter than usual.

The LIGHT metaphor is commonly applicable and is very commonly used in Persian, so there is the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS LIGHT in both languages. Kövecses (1991) argues that the LIGHT metaphor renders numerous properties of the emotion of happiness. First of all, happiness is depicted as the opposite of unpleasant emotional experiences like sadness, anxiety and apprehension. In addition, such metaphorical use indicates a shift

in the described person's state from anxious and sad to happiness, for instance on hearing some pleasant or good news. Secondly, the shift from the state of sadness to happiness goes together with another shift in perspective because happiness implies a positive outlook on the world (as in "bright side", "light up" and "brighten up"). Thirdly, a happy person is depicted as an energetic and dynamic person. For this reason, a happy person's external brightness can be considered a reflection of his internal body heat resulting from his lively activity. Fourthly, thermo-power, as it is known from our understanding of some physical phenomena, spreads from one object to another in three ways: radiation, convection, and conduction (Al-Haq & El-Sharif, 2008).

3.3 Container metaphor

According to Kövecses (1991), the third major conceptual metaphor for happiness is HAPPINESS/JOY IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER. We can find the conventional metaphoric expressions encoding this conceptual metaphor in English as below:

5)

- a) *We were **full of joy***
- b) *I **brimmed over with joy** when I saw her*
- c) *She **could not contain her joy** any longer*
- d) *He was **overflowing with joy***
- e) *My heart is **filled with joy***

In a similar vein, Persian also utilises the CONTAINER metaphor in its expression of happy emotion, which is mapped onto fluid in a container. The following expressions are manifestations of this metaphor:

6)

- a) *cheshm-hash/ **por** / az / bargh / bod*
*eye- s / **full**/ of/ electricity/ was*
*Lit: His eyes were **full of** electricity.*
- b) *ou / labriz / az / shadi / bod*
***He** / **brimmed** / of/ joy / was*
*Lit: "He **brimmed over** with joy"*
- c) *ou/ az/ khoshhali / **dasht** / mitarakid*
*He / of/ joy / have / **bursting***
*Lit: He was **bursting with joy**.*
- d) *ou / az / khoshhali / **to** / postesh / nemigonjid*
*she / of / joy / in / **skin** / **could not contain***
*Lit: She **could not contain** joy within her skin.*

From the above examples, it can be observed that English and Persian share the CONTAINER metaphor in expressing happiness. Lexical items such as *full*, *fill*, *overflow*, *brim* and *contain* in English and "*por*" (full), "*labriz*" (brim), "*tarakidan*" (burst), "*gonjidan*" (contain) in Persian are all closely related to the container concept. Besides, they are all applied to describing happiness in both languages. In the expressions above, the

human body is regarded as a container. When the body is the container, happiness can be viewed as a kind of substance. Happiness (fluid) can be put into human body so that it can fill the body. The body brims or overflows with so much happiness, because it cannot hold so much happy emotion. Therefore, the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER exists in both English and Persian.

3.4 Animal metaphor

Kövecses (1991) also argues that A HAPPY PERSON IS AN ANIMAL THAT LIVES WELL. In most cultures and beliefs, the human being is regarded as the only rational and reasonable animal so that this rationality characterizes his behaviour and actions. This animalistic metaphor represents the pleasure and enjoyment that a happy person experiences when he lives in peace and in harmony with his environment without being bothered by modern civilisation and complex conventions. Interestingly, English and Persian use this metaphor in describing happiness:

7)

- a) She was **crowing with excitement**
- b) He was as happy as **a pig in slop**
- c) I was **purring with delight**
- d) He is as happy as a **clam**

In Persian, similar metaphorical expressions are also found:

8)

- a) az / khoshhali / mesle/ **khar** / keif / mikoneh
of/ joy / like / **donkey**/ enjoy / did-he/she
Lit: He's like a **donkey** enjoying joy.
- b) Az / khoshhali / **bal** / dar-avordam
from/ happiness / **wing** / take out
Lit: My wings spread out with happiness.
- c) **kabk-esh** / **khoros**/ mikhone
Partridge-her / rooster/ crowing
Lit: her **partridge** is crowing like a **rooster**.
- d) ba / **domesh** / gerdo / mishkane
with/ **tail**- her / walnut / breaking
Lit: She is breaking a walnut with her **tail**.

In the above examples, the bold lexical items such as “*khar*” (*donkey*), “*khoros*” (*rooster*), “*dom*” (*tail*), “*bal*” (*wing*) are used to express feelings of happiness in Persian. It is evident from the data that there are notable similarities between English and Persian in the conceptualisation of animalistic behaviour in relation to expressing happiness.

3.5 Unique Persian expressions of happiness

The above similarities in emotive metaphorical expressions come from similar concepts of happiness in English and Persian because both have the same body experience and both use body actions to express happy feelings. It is obvious that there cannot always be one to one correspondence between Persian and English due to cultural differences. On the other hand, some Persian metaphorical concepts such as HAPPINESS IS AN ENERGY IN THE EYES are not found in English.

9)

- a) *cheshm / hayash / por / az / **bargh** / bod*
*eye / his/her / full / of / **electricity** / was*
 Lit: *Her eyes were full of electricity.*

In the above example, electricity is mapped onto happiness. It should be noted that the Persian word “*bargh*” (Lit: electricity) is a form of energy that can produce light, heat, and power for machines, computers, televisions, etc. In Persian, the eyes are conceptually and linguistically highlighted in the face that can be the barometer of emotion. Thus, ‘eyes’ are such an important feature of the human face and as a result are used very frequently in the conceptualisation of emotion in Persian. In the example, the energy in the body is reflected in the eyes of the person. In Persian, expressions such as ‘*barghe shadi to negahesh moj mizad*’ (Lit: *electricity of joy in his eyes waves*) also manifest the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS AN ENERGY IN THE EYES.

Another uniquely Persian expression of happiness is the use of the phrase “*shakhe shemshad*” (Lit: *boxtree*) to represent happiness and health.

- b) *Ou / mesle / **shakh** / **shemshad** / vared -shod*
*he / like / branch / **boxtree** / come- in*
 Lit: *He comes in like the branch of a boxtree.*

In the above example, the word ‘*shemshad*’ (Lit: *high tree*) in Persian is related to the concept of healthy and happy. So ‘*shakhe shemshad*’ (Lit: *boxtree*) is mapped onto happiness, which denotes a straight, tall and strong tree in Persian culture. In this metaphor, “*shakhe shemshad*” symbolizes the upright posture for a happy person in a positive emotional state, while the opposite drooping posture is consistent with a negative one. In addition, according to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), ‘happiness’ corresponds to the physical experience of standing or walking upright, while depression corresponds to the physical experience of lying down when we are tired or depressed. Therefore, in Persian traditional culture, the term ‘*shemshad*’ which comes from the domain of nature is used as a metaphorical expression to express happiness. Obviously, this example (9.b) supports the claim that orientational metaphors are not arbitrary, but have a basis in the physical and cultural experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

4. Conclusion

This article has examined emotive metaphorical expressions of happiness in English and Persian. A study of emotive metaphorical expressions reflects the indispensable role that metaphor plays in our understanding of our emotional state with linguistic differences. With regard to happiness, English and Persian share these conceptual metaphors : HAPPINESS IS UP, HAPPINESS IS LIGHT, HAPPINESS IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER, and HAPPINESS IS ANIMALISTIC BEHAVIOUR. These conceptualisations of happiness seem to be the most universal metaphors. However, there are some differences between Persian and English in the conceptualization of happiness. We found that in contrast with English, Persian uses different linguistic expressions in the metaphor HAPPINESS IS AN ENERGY. The linguistic instantiation of this mapping in Persian is viewed as HAPPINESS IS ELECTRICITY. In

Persian, ‘electricity’ refers to the intensive energy which is reflected in the eyes to denote happiness, while in English, happiness in general is viewed as a highly energized state, characterized by a high energy activity such as dancing, singing or jumping (Kovecses, 1991, p. 33). Furthermore, the Persian expression ‘*shakhe shemshad*’ (Lit:boxtree) illustrates another difference of happiness metaphor in Persian, namely HAPPINESS IS NATURE. In conclusion, this research has utilised linguistic evidence from Persian that supports Lakoff’s (1980) Theory.

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